



## **Preventing Youth Bullying Through Education and Awareness**

*By: Samantha Hahn*

Youth bullying is not a new issue. Growing up, many of you may have been a bully's victim or at least known someone who's been called degrading names, or in other ways been harassed. But bullying is something that can be easily overlooked with a *"kids will be kids"* attitude.

Bullying has become a universal issue that affects both boys and girls regardless of age or circumstance and over the past few years has grown in epic proportions, from "name-calling" and throwing "sticks and stones" on the playground to invading a person's home via "text messaging" and the Internet. Thanks to the technologies of today (computers, web sites, and cell phones) it has become increasingly easier and more appealing for bullies to seek out victims. Kids who might have been hesitant to participate in bullying in the past can now hide behind an anonymous screen name without fear of being caught.

Name calling, physical attacks, death threats, nightmares, depression, counseling, and recovery—as a victim of severe bullying both online and offline for years, I fully understand the long-term effects bullying can have on a child. My bullying experience started with a rumor that quickly escalated into verbal and physical abuse and eventually onto the Internet. The bullying lasted for almost 6 years.

I changed schools three times. But even that did nothing to stop the bullying, because the bullies found new ways to torment me. For me, the worst part of being cyber bullied was on the Internet because you have no idea who your attackers may be. They can hide behind a screen name, remaining anonymous while the victim becomes increasingly vulnerable and defenseless. They can say cruel and malicious things, threaten, or even pretend to be other people. I received instant messages and e-mails saying, "We're going to kill you"; "I wouldn't go to the bathroom alone if I were you"; and "you better watch your back."

So on the Internet, you have no idea who the bully is. You're in class looking at every student as if he or she is the enemy. Because of the bully's mind games, I started having nightmares and couldn't eat. I was physically making myself sick. The bullies got inside my head and made me paranoid, always looking over my shoulder wondering who the invisible attacker was. After receiving online threats such as "We're going to kill you" and "I wouldn't go to the bathroom," I refused to go to the bathroom while in school. My grades dropped drastically because I couldn't concentrate. I was frightened all the time and afraid to go anywhere by myself. This continued on and off from 6th grade all through high school. Some weeks were quiet, and I thought things might be calming down. I would think, "Wow, maybe the bullies got tired of me and moved on to someone new." But as soon as I got comfortable, the abuse would start all over again.

As hard as I tried, I just couldn't escape the situation. I couldn't run away because there was

nowhere to hide. You're probably thinking: "Why didn't you just block the screen name or turn off the computer?" Well, I did just that, and still the bullying continued. I would block screen names and in a matter of seconds a new one would be created. I would shut my computer off and not go on for weeks at a time but, as soon as I signed back on, the bullying started all over again.

At first I tried to ignore the bullies by thinking I was being oversensitive and hoping that by *not* bringing attention to them-they would go away. Not only did the bullies NOT go away, the bullying grew progressively worse and more physical. I was pushed off the school bus onto the concrete and slammed into the glass doors of the school, receiving several concussions. I couldn't hide the bullying anymore, my parents reported every situation to the school. Nothing was being taken care of. When a boy threw sheet metal at my face my parents then took the issue to the Board of Education only to find no records in regards to the bullying I endured. My bullying experiences were swept under the carpet, but now with state laws on bullying requiring all schools to have an anti-bullying policy in place and detailing consequences for bullies, that can no longer happen. It is vitally important for victims and parents to know this.

It has always been extremely important for me to get my story out to the ones who may be facing the same situations I faced in school. Kids need to see they are not alone and even more importantly they need to realize that positive things can still come out of bad experiences. In 2004 I started a Tolerance/Anti-Bullying program bringing my message into dozens of schools throughout the state, reaching students from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade through high school. The program, structured around my personal experiences, shows how bullying can affect its victims and their families. The program soon earned the respect of the New Jersey State Attorney General's Office and in October 2004 I was asked to be the spokesperson on victim's behalf for the state's Anti-bullying Campaign "New Jersey Cares about Bullying." As part of the Bias Crime Unit, I speak at state conferences and lectures.

I also work with i-SAFE, a national non-profit Internet-safety organization. i-SAFE teaches safe and responsible Internet use through classroom lessons, through parent programs at home, and through unique peer-to-peer student mentoring,

As an i-SAFE mentor, I help teach students how best to avoid becoming a victim of a cyber bullying and other online threats, like predators. I teach, among other lessons, the four Rs: recognize inappropriate behavior, refuse requests for personal information or a meeting, respond assertively, and report inappropriate online behavior to their parents and their Internet Service Provider. I also challenge students to become i-MENTORs themselves, which empowers them to spread Internet safety education to their fellow students, their parents and others in their community. There are 234 student mentors in New Jersey alone.

Web sites like myspace.com are attracting millions and millions of kids. Many log on daily because it's fun to be part of an online community. However, far too many of them are not aware of the risks or dangers. Rumors and gossip—whether true or false—are spread around the world instantly. Young children post pictures of themselves, and they reveal personal information that can lead a cyber predator right to their door. Schools and parents need to do more to teach students how best to be safe on the Internet.

So far, 45,600 students have been taught i-SAFE lessons in New Jersey schools. But, unfortunately I was not one of them. I did not have the benefit of i-SAFE Internet safety lessons in any of the schools I went to before or during the time I was being bullied online. My parents and I were left in the dark about what to do, and I suffered greatly. Now based on my experience with middle and high school students, I know first hand that Internet safety education works. i-SAFE

makes it cool to be cyber safe. i-SAFE's interactive curriculum and community outreach programs connect with kids, enabling them to participate in a fun activity to help them better learn Internet safety lessons. It's the same with parents. Parents, who often just give up when it comes to computers and technology, learn how to keep their children safe online through i-PARENT Boards and instructive Parent Night presentations.

At the conclusion of my presentations to students and parents, I challenge them to take action. Take action to make a difference, take action and become an i-MENTOR. Take action and demand that your district use i-SAFE. So in that spirit, I call on Congress to take action. Take action by passing legislation requiring Internet safety education be taught in all schools, so every student will get a quality and possible life saving education. With that curriculum in place beginning at an early age, students will learn to take control of their online experiences and be able to recognize and avoid dangerous, destructive and illegal online behavior, and to respond appropriately. Thank you.